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SOME ESSENTIAL FACTS OF SOCIAL PROGRESS

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The old doctrine of individualism has been pretty thoroughly discredited by historical and psychological investigation. We no longer believe that the savage life is one of unrestricted freedom or that society arose out of a mutual contract by which well-developed individuals surrendered certain "natural" rights. The groupless man is a rightless man. The primitive man is a member of a group and whatever rights he has belong to him because he is a member of a group. His conduct is prescribed and regulated by the customs of his group and his rights and obligations are determined thereby. Civilization means a constant growth in freedom and initiative, but in primitive society custom rules with iron sway. The whole aim of savage education is to secure loyalty and obedience to the tribal customs. Ceremonial, mystery, magic, reverence for elders and for glorified ancestors, fear of punishment and hope for reward from the tribe and the tribal gods are all employed to educate the growing members into the group customs. In primitive society there is little room for the reflective judgment of the individual, for even in the doubtful situation one must learn from magic man or priest or elder the customs which the tribe prescribes. A change or deviation of custom is a matter of serious moment to the entire tribe. Individuality belongs to the group. Property is a group possession, marriage is arranged, regulated, and controlled by the tribe, and almost every phase of conduct seems to be prescribed according to the customs of the past. If one member is fortunate in hunting or in war the whole tribe shares in his success; if a member offends another tribe or transgresses the will of the deity the whole tribe has offended and must make restitution or pay the penalty. In fact, as Bagehot declares, primitive society is a "cake of custom" in which individual initiative and freedom are at a minimum.

But there is no society where the initiative of the individual can be absolutely eliminated. For even tribal customs have had an origin and suffer transformations; they grow and change. A custom is a social mode of reaction to a social situation—a social habit which has come to have the approval of the group. And when we ask after the origin of custom we find a place for the initiative of the individual, for the origin of custom is found in the successful action of some leader of the group. We must bear in mind that each member of the group has to cope with a common environment, has to meet the same difficulties, and that each through the law of heredity has come to share in common social instincts. The organism of each individual is similar, each has the same needs, is tuned to the same stimuli, is subject to the same dangers, is attacked by the same enemies. The problems presented to the members then are social or common problems and the first successful response of any member may become the response of each member by what is called the principle of imitation. The successful response or custom is not a thought-out method of action so much as it is a way of action obtained by the trial-and-error method, but it does represent an intelligent solution of a social situation. It is then in the initiative of some individual that a new custom arises or an old custom becomes transformed into a way of action that will cope with changed conditions. In the origin and change of custom, then, we have a place for the function of the individual. In the prowess and skill of the hunter, in the strategy and bravery of the warrior, in the dramatic initiative and success of the lover, customs have their origin and personality its rôle. It is in the struggle for food, the satisfaction of the needs of sex, in protection from enemies—that is, in industry, love, and war—that modifications of customs and institutions have always arisen. And this reaction of the personal factor into the group custom which we recognize in the most primitive society is the essential factor in all social progress. For all social progress means the modification or reconstruction of the existing customs, institutions, or beliefs through the originative, inventive intelligence of the individual. On the economic side what changes in the social structure are due to the transition from hunting to grazing, from pasturing to agriculture, from extensive to

intensive farming, from agricultural and rural life to the commercial and city life, from the individual productions of the mediaeval craftsmen to the large-scale production of our capitalistic and machine era? On the other hand, the necessities of protective and aggressive warfare have played their part in the development of the structural organization of the states; in the rise of kingship and aristocracy, of slave and serf. And the religious and the sexual needs of the individual have reacted as well into the social customs and institutions and have played an important rôle in the institutional development of society.

In fact, when we consider the whole range of history we recognize that there is not and never was a society in which the intelligence and initiative of the individual are not modifying, or did not modify the existing customs. In a primitive or static society this modification may be uncertain, unconscious, accidental; whereas in our advanced civilization this progress becomes a conscious aim that is wrought out in its system of education. The law of social progress is then the gradual reconstruction of the existing customs and institutions as the conditions of the social life demand, through the intelligent and free action of the members of the group. Primitive society is static and conservative; it can secure order and stability but it is unable to secure progress. On the other hand, we have examples where in an effort for progress societies have lost social stability and control. The problem is to secure permanency and progress, order and growth. Custom is the conservative element which secures permanence and stability; it conserves the past and guarantees law and order. Individual initiative is the dynamic factor, the inventive, creative, transforming principle, without which society would be static and monotonous. These two factors work together. The conservative and the radical, the priest and the prophet, the orthodox and the heretic, the legalist and the anarchist, the capitalist and the socialist, the persecutor and the reformer—each is impotent without the other, and each, checked by the other, may make a contribution toward genuine social welfare.

If this is a true statement of the essential factors in social progress then there are certain corollaries which we may do well to emphasize.

First, we should recognize that there must be a certain fixity and relative permanency to any existing society, which finds its expression in the customs, laws, institutions, creeds, and general social structure. But this permanency is only relative and is essential to the dynamic, progressive character of society. Change and permanency, as Kant pointed out, are relative to each other. Society is not an absolutely fixed entity, it is not an eternal unchangeable order; its institutions and customs are not brute, bare, "given" facts or unchangeable laws to which each individual must absolutely conform; they are rather data for reconstruction by his creative intelligence into means for the adequate realization of his purposes. Ours is not the only age in which men have had to face new problems and make social reconstructions. Our age has become conscious of the principle of progress and has sought to work out a technique in the way of a scientific method; and we should on that account make greater progress without danger to social stability and order. But our task of social reconstruction is a race problem and the inevitable essential of an advancing civilization. The religious worker must not imagine that this task of reconstruction is peculiar to his vocation. The social institutions are as intimately related as are the corresponding impulses and needs of the individual soul. In so far as there is unity in the one there must be in the other. Religious reconstruction would not be demanded if transformations and reconstructions were not taking place in the other institutions of our social life. And in this reconstruction each social leader must face the fact of the relative fixity and inertia of the institutions with which he has to deal. The business man must recognize the organized institutional, industrial, and commercial activities. He must make use of the existing banking and credit systems, of the means of transportation, of the current legal customs and the ethics of business enterprise. The politician must recognize the existing political institutions of the state, the customs, traditions, platforms, and ethics of his political party. And in the same way the religious leader must deal with the existing social institutions in his realm. There is the denomination with its traditions, achievements, and creeds; there is the larger organization of the religious life and the peculiar

organization in each local community. There is a certain fixity and tenacity to these institutions. Even when almost outgrown they seem to possess tremendous power. There is always the temptation to take these existing institutions as absolutely fixed, to fit into their demands, and so to lose one's freedom and initiative in irrational conformity to the existing standards, to perform one's part according to the established rules of the past without hope of progress or effort for reform. But no strong man can yield to such a temptation. The man who adopts uncritically the ethics of his profession, who carries on industry and commerce in perfect conformity to the ideals dominant in the established "successful" business enterprises, who fits into the dogmas, creeds, expectations, traditions, prejudices, and institutions of his existing political or religious party, is guilty of cowardice and failure and has purchased his immediate advancement at the price of his true manhood, at the sacrifice of his creative intelligence, and at the loss of the highest social service and leadership. He will realize, too, in future days that the onward march of human society has been gradually transforming these institutions and in its progress has left him stranded and forsaken, deprived of the opportunity of social leadership, and bereft of the reverence and affection of his comrades.

Second, the ideals of one age become the achievements, and so the customs, of another age. The growth of society is a process of *continual* reconstruction. Each age has its own peculiar task, and there is always an opportunity for leadership, for creative initiative. The social goal or ideal is being continually reconstructed. It is well for us to learn this lesson from history. All our institutions that seem so fixed and powerful today—industrial, political, religious—are creatures of yesterday, and are changing before our very eyes. We need scarcely point out that the great changes in the industrial world, with effects upon the social structure so wide-reaching that we are not yet able to comprehend them, have all come about since the industrial revolution of a century ago and some of the most momentous changes are taking place at the present time. The development of democracy and its transforming influence upon social structure is a product of the last century, and its full meaning and significance is just dawning upon us. Science

as a method of social control, as a medium of social progress, is an attainment of the modern world. Reconstruction is going on in industry, in politics, and in science, and there must be a corresponding ethical and religious reconstruction. A religion of democracy, a gospel of human responsibility, duty, and social service will find its appeal to our age and is essential to our needs. Our deities and religious heroes must be the bearers of our advancing ethical and social ideals. Our age is able to give a new appreciation and interpretation of the Christ and his kingdom. We must see in him the ideal citizen and brother, the socialized individual, the incarnation of love, and his kingdom must become a presentation of the noblest aspirations of our democracy, of our ideals of social justice and righteousness, of the ideal community we seek to realize. The social message of Jesus can be interpreted to make a powerful appeal to our age.

Then, too, science has taught us *how* to express our love for our neighbor, how to make our good-will effective; it is a method whereby our religion can work out its ideals. We are able to analyze conditions and to control them in such a way that the opportunity for efficient social service has been multiplied in our day. We are able to locate the germs of disease that baffled our ancestors, and by hygienics we can change the health, happiness, and morals of a community; we can determine the physical cause of the defectiveness of the little child and by removing it restore him to the opportunity for a fully developed manhood. We are able to control the social conditions that surround the youth and by placing him in a proper society and by giving him an education suited to his needs we can rescue him from a career of criminality to a life of social usefulness. If science is to be the method of social reconstruction it is still the task of religion to make the social ideal attractive and commanding, to inspire within the individual a mighty enthusiasm and passion for the realization of this ideal, to fill his soul with love, and faith, and joy, and peace.

Third, as a society becomes conscious of its ideals and methods it must give a higher appreciation to the function and worth of the individual. For the pivot of progress is the soul of a man. If it is the clash of customs that gives the problem for reconstruction

it is the intelligence of the individual that makes the reconstruction and offers the solution. The creative element emerges within the consciousness of the individual. In the man of genius, in his creative imagination, the invention is constructed, the scientific hypothesis is formed and tested, the moral and religious ideal is born before it enters with its transforming power into human society. And when we think of what this means, what a value it gives to personality! Our modern scientific view of the world was at one time but a hypothesis in the consciousness of Copernicus; out of the dream, the vision of a Columbus, has come the discovery of America with all its significance for humanity. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter, walked among the peasants of Galilee, accompanied by a few fishermen, and his kingdom of God with his unique leadership therein was but a vision, an ideal of his own subjective consciousness. He gave it forth to his disciples and what tremendous, transforming power it has wrought throughout the centuries! For the product of the creative soul becomes the common heritage. As the result of a life's labor in research the scientist is able to discover the germ of a certain disease and tomorrow the ordinary practitioner brings his remedy and cures the pauper child when yesterday the son of the king died from the same disease.

And the advance of our civilization over that of a primitive people is, in part, in the fact that we seek to work out a method for the reconstruction of our customs. The creative elements emerged in primitive society and new customs arose through the activity of its leaders; but it was often by sheer luck, by the trial-and-error method, by accident, that the reconstruction took place. There was no conscious conceptual analysis of the situation, so that while the customs embody the wisdom and experience of the tribe they often contain much that is unessential and is even detrimental to the tribal welfare. We seek to reconstruct by rational investigation, by conceptual thinking, by a scientific analysis of the situation. Our modern science is simply our technique developed for the reconstruction of our customs. Scientific thinking is accurate thinking, thinking under conditions that we can control and test, thinking with reference to the solution of a certain unsatis-

factory situation in the social life. The savage educated to secure conformity to custom; we educate to produce new members of the group able to carry forward social progress and reform. The boy who has grown up in a little community where farming is carried on according to the customs and traditions of the past will probably follow the same methods of farming himself. But the youth who has been educated in one of our agricultural schools is able to make an analysis of the soils with which he has to deal, and through breeding to get some control over animal and plant forms, and thus by scientific farming can transform the customs of agriculture to the advancement of the community. And in a similar manner it is the aim of science to bring all physical and social conditions under like control. Science, interpreted in this larger sense, must be the medium of religious and political and industrial reconstruction. As a method science is to become universal.

Fourth, we must ever remember that the supreme values of life are imbedded in these institutions, customs, and traditions which we seek to reconstruct. The customs are the data, the material for the creative intelligence of the individual; and the new, to be successful, must preserve the values of the old. In an age of out-grown customs men have felt so restricted by them that at times they have imagined that a life of freedom could be lived apart from all social institutions. But apart from the contribution of the social life the individual would never come to realize the narrowness of the customs. All individual growth is conditioned by the society, with its institutions and organizations, of which one is a member. Savage society may produce a dwarfed and impoverished individual, while civilization enables the individual to secure a growth as an heir of the culture of all the centuries. And society educates its growing members by leading them to an appreciative appropriation of all its social values. It is in the wealth of the social customs that the individual gets his problems. Each invention, hypothesis, moral or religious ideal is a social product conditioned by the customs and institutions of the group life. The industrial revolution came in response to a social need. The great discoveries had opened up the world for large-scale production;

means of transportation and inventions in production acted and reacted upon each other. Then, too, each single invention or institution has behind it a long history and is in a true sense a social product. The same principle applies to all our social institutions, the family, industry, the state, the church. Jesus' message and mission was a consummation of the prophetic revelation and activity, and the concepts by which he sought to clothe his religious message were conditioned by the religious institutions and customs of that peculiarly religious people. We change and transform the customs of the past to meet our needs but we must reverence these customs, for in them is deposited the priceless values of human experience.

The arts, the sciences, the literature, the hymns and psalms and prayers, the social institutions of our race—it is in these we find the values that shall guide us in our response to present needs. These have their message to our hearts because they came from our kinsmen. In them is embodied the great human experience, and because of the unity of our race, the solidarity of humanity, they condition our development. In a religious sense may we not say that it is the living spirit of God which binds humanity into a unity and conditions the development of today through the appreciative appropriation of the values of the past, enabling us to carry forward the onward march of the kingdom of God? So that each individual must be rooted and grounded in the rich values of his social heritage to attain his own development and to carry onward social progress and reform.